

The Ambivalence of African Elitehood

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Abstract

Recent discussions in South Africa about the role of the so-called patriotic bourgeoisie highlight the much debated question of what role elite Africans can and ought to play in the upliftment of the poor. Those supporting the notion of a patriotic bourgeoisie believe that national or racial solidarity is sufficient to allow privileged Africans to act in the interests of their poorer fellow citizens. However, a reconsideration of an older discussion of African elitehood, that of Amílcar Cabral, suggests that something more may be needed before elites can act in the interests of the poor. Cabral argues that elites need to renounce their privilege and to live and struggle alongside the poor if pro-poor social transformation is to be achieved. While Cabral may be right that shared racial or national identity is insufficient for elite solidarity with the poor, he does not consider all the complexities that arise when elites actually try to work with and for the poor. A consideration of the experiences of a long-standing Senegalese NGO reveal some of these complexities and suggest that any attempt by African elites to engage meaningfully in the upliftment of the poor, will inevitably involve continuous and difficult negotiation between paternalism and naïve egalitarianism.

Keywords

Cabral, egalitarianism, elites, non-governmental organizations, patriotic bourgeoisie, privilege

Introduction

One of the most debated topics in current South African politics is the topic of black economic empowerment (BEE) and, as part of this topic, the role of the so-called black or patriotic bourgeoisie. While this debate links up to a whole number of important issues particular to the South African situation, my interest is in an aspect of the debate which relates to a question of more general and broad relevance to the African continent as a whole. That aspect is the question of what role relatively privileged Africans – African elites, if you like – ought to play in the upliftment of the poor. While African countries are generally considered to be poor, most have some kind of a relatively wealthy elite and the role of this elite seems to be a very controversial one. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a category of people who are more maligned and yet from whom more is expected than African elites. On the one hand, academic discourse, the media and African literature present us with countless images of the corrupt or pathologically self-interested elite member who uses his, or occasionally her, position of privilege for no other purpose than self-aggrandisement

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